

Domitian, the Frightened Emperor

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'He had long had a premonition of the last year and last day of his life, and even of the hour and manner of his death. In his youth astrologers had predicted all this to him.' This piece of information from his biographer Suetonius is not surprising; Domitian was not the only Roman Emperor to believe in horoscopes and in the power of astrologers to predict your future according to the stars under which you were born. But Domitian was not expecting to die in his bed. That is shown by the action he took as the time of his predicted doom approached. The walls of the colonnades where he usually walked he had lined with a hard white stone that would function as a mirror and show the reflection of anyone coming up behind him. He also took the precaution of putting to death his secretary Epaphroditus who, twenty-five years before, had helped the Emperor Nero to avoid execution by sticking a dagger in his throat.

A new Nero

Domitian was often compared with Nero, and he knew it. In his youth he had been a poet, and quite a good one; when he became Emperor poetry was given up – he would not be stereotyped as a second artistic tyrant. Near the end of his life he put to death a senator who wrote a biography of one of Nero's victims. The satirist Juvenal was to call him 'the bald Nero', while Tacitus compares him to Nero, to make the point that Domitian was even worse: 'Nero at least withdrew his eyes, and did not contemplate the crimes he authorized: the worst thing we suffered under

Domitian was watching him and being watched.' Neither Emperor, as the last of his dynasty, was likely to enjoy a good press under his successors.

Why was Domitian so certain that he would be assassinated or executed, and not die of disease or an accident? The parallel with Nero is a clue. Both felt insecure in their power and both had ended as cruel tyrants. Suetonius says of Domitian that he became cruel through fear, 'beyond the demands of his nature', and he goes on to illustrate his natural dislike of bloodshed by saying that, as a young man, he wanted to ban animal sacrifice, a routine part of ancient religion. Twenty years later, as Emperor, he was prepared to terrify dignitaries by summoning them to a black and silent room, where he discoursed on death and offered them sacrificial meats, as if they were in a tomb.

Son of Vespasian

Like Nero, Domitian became Princeps solely because of his birth. Though not as young when he took power as the seventeen-year-old Nero, Domitian, at the age of thirty in A.D. 81, still had no achievements to justify his position, especially military achievements which the Romans rated the highest. This lack was all the more striking in his case because both his father Vespasian and his brother Titus had been highly successful commanders. Twelve years earlier, when Titus was thirty, he was already a seasoned soldier. After fighting with his father to put down the big revolt in Judaea, he had been left to finish the siege of

Jerusalem himself in 70. Domitian at that time was in Rome hiding during the siege of the city by the supporters of Vitellius, but when Vespasian's forces occupied the city, Domitian thought he had his chance. He went north to suppress a German revolt, only to find when he arrived that the war was over.

Vespasian had other uses for his younger son. Delaying his return to Rome for almost a year after his victory in the Civil War of 69, Vespasian used his confederate Licinius Mucianus and Domitian to complete various pieces of dirty work: killing off possible aristocratic pretenders to the throne, dismissing distrusted members of the Praetorian Guard, thwarting the senate of its hopes to punish those who had brought political prosecutions under Nero. Domitian's presence guaranteed the legitimacy of what Mucianus did. There followed in June of 71 the first spectacle of Vespasian's reign, the triumph of Vespasian and Titus for the reconquest of Judaea. The Emperor rode at the front of the procession, Titus followed, and Domitian rode behind them, but while they were each in the traditional chariot of the triumphing general, he was merely on horseback. Domitian was subsequently given no opportunity to win glory by commanding an army or governing a province, either while his father was Emperor or when his brother succeeded him.

The reason for keeping him in the background concerned the succession. Since the system of the Principate was not in theory a monarchy, there could be no law of succession. At the death of a Princeps, only tradition and his own intentions, signified via

honours previously conferred and the division of property in the will, stood between Rome and the horrors of civil war. Vespasian, who had seen under Tiberius and Claudius the problems that could arise from ambiguity, made a clear distinction between his sons while advancing both. Given their difference in age, it was easy to give Titus the highest office of consul when Domitian was made praetor, and to share the censorship with Titus when Domitian became consul. The fact that Titus had 'Imperator' as part of his title and held numbered terms of tribunician power, distinctive of the Princeps' position, made contemporaries see him as a virtual co-ruler. He served too as Praetorian Prefect, and was therefore in charge of security for his father.

Brother of Titus

Vespasian no doubt expected Titus to succeed him, and to produce a son to follow him. Yet when Vespasian died in 79, Domitian hoped to assume the position that Titus had held under his father. Domitian even claimed that Vespasian's will had been altered, and that his father had indicated, probably by the division of property, parity between his sons, and the charge gained plausibility from the fact that Titus was an expert imitator of handwritings. In fact, Titus described Domitian as his 'partner and successor', but he did not give him a share in the tribunician power, and 'Imperator' was not part of his name. For Titus was in a dilemma. He was only forty at his accession and, though divorced, could still marry and produce an heir. But as long as he had none, the stability of the dynasty demanded that he treat Domitian as the expected and welcome successor.

The reputation of Titus benefited from his early death only

two years later. The hostility between the brothers is described by the ancient writers as pained kindness on Titus' side, selfish resentment on Domitian's. But a stray reference in Pliny tells us that Domitian's friends were afraid of Titus, and Domitian was careful to honour his brother's memory after his death.

Domitian in power

As Princeps Domitian set about acquiring military victories, campaigning personally and adding the title of Imperator to his name twenty-three times, three more than his father. He also bought the loyalty of the soldiers by an increase of their pay by a third. But his position was weak without an heir. His temporary divorce from his wife Domitia Longina might have been occasioned as much by her failure to produce a son to replace the one who had died in infancy, as by her liaison with the actor Paris. Domitian finally decided to advance two of his nephews, but that did not stop him from killing their father Flavius Clemens. Like Nero, Domitian feared the potential rivals within his own family, accumulating as the dynasty continued. In fact, he put to death both of his male first cousins: the elder was doomed when the herald, by mistake, announced that Flavius Sabinus had been elected, not 'consul', but 'Imperator'. There were also the descendants of the Republican aristocracy who might be thought more worthy than the upstart Flavians. Domitian destroyed four of them who he thought had imperial ambitions. It was a saying of his that the situation of a ruler is most unhappy because no one believes that he has detected a real

conspiracy unless he is actually assassinated. Domitian ended by proving his point.

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